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TAYLOR

POEM BEFORE THE PHI BETA
SOCIETY

1850

WIDENER

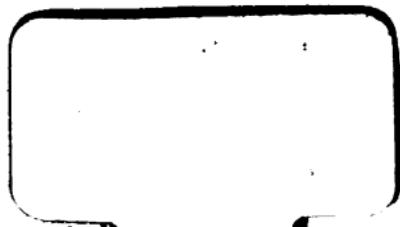


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THE AMERICAN LEGEND.

A

P O E M

BEFORE

THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

OF

HARVARD UNIVERSITY,

JULY 18, 1850.

BY BAYARD TAYLOR.

—

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

C A M B R I D G E :

PUBLISHED BY JOHN BARTLETT.

1850.

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C A M B R I D G E :

M E T C A L F A N D C O M P A N Y ,

P R I N T E R S T O T H E U N I V E R S I T Y .

THE AMERICAN LEGEND.

WHEN, hoarse and loud, the winds of Winter
blow,

And moonlight glitters on the crisping snow,—
When streams amid their sheltering sedges yield,
And hide their fretting with a crystal shield,—
When tags of ice the oak's rough beard adorn,
And, sleety-haired, the willow sighs forlorn,
While, bent with snow, like some grief-burdened
brow

White ere its season, snaps the hemlock-bough,—
How warm and cheerful, through the dreary cold,
Beams the lit window of a farm-house old!

How the rough shell, whose windy gables freeze
Amid the creaking of the orchard trees,
Pours through its loophole,—far along the
night,
The bursting fulness of its heart of light!

Leave we the frost to forge its noiseless chain,
And play Asmodeus at the ruddy pane.
In the wide fireplace, as the flame upsprings,
The pine-log crackles and the hickory sings:
Their ample glow the household group betrays,
Who feel the warmth and gather round the blaze,
Happier for all the wastes of moonlit snow,
Lapped in content, to hear the wild winds blow.
The sturdy sire, whose fourscore years gone by
Scarce warp his voice, or dim his pleasant eye,
Finds in the soothing sounds that charm the
night
A tranquil joy, recalling past delight;
And while the brave old cider passes round,
And gleams the board, with rosy apples crowned,

The ancient memories, never wholly lost,
No longer lie congealed in Age's frost,
But melt in dew, that with benignant rain
Freshens his heart and makes him young again.

He speaks of winters whose relentless power
Made peril darker at its darkest hour,—
When winds were louder in their midnight
tune,
And pines rose black against the icy moon,
What time, in cold and hunger's keenest stress,
Their camp-fires lit the Northern wilderness.
Again those bands the weary journey make
By rugged portage and by frozen lake,
Scaring the moose within their mountain lairs
With the shrill cheer of Continental airs.
Again he sees them drift, in hopeless wreck,
Beneath the battlements of old Quebec,
Hears the deep drum-beat and the trumpet's
swell,
As on the morning when Montgomery fell,

And the old eye betrays a gathering tear,
Born of those drops it shed beside his bier.

The picture changes. 'Tis the early May;
The lake spreads dimly in the dawning gray,
Calmed with the mist that hides its placid
shores,
And gives no sound beneath the muffled oars.
Silent and swift the soldier-boatmen glide
Where old Ticonderoga fronts the tide;
Around the bastions, through the arch they creep,
Awake the careless sentry from his sleep,
And storm the court, where Ethan Allen's tread
Roused the bewildered chieftain from his bed,
To hear that voice of stormy volume claim
The fortress-key in Great Jehovah's name,—
To see him turn aside and grimly laugh
When the cross-banner fluttered down its staff,
And rose the inspiring shouts that only rise
When Freedom's sons exult in Freedom's vic-
tories!

The old man's heart, filled with the olden time,
Gives to his voice an unaccustomed chime ;
And, as one memory to another clings,
The scanty tide receives a thousand springs,
And backward flows through all his father's lore,
Till fades the track along the glimmering shore.
With chin on hand and sunburnt forehead bent,
His sons lean forward, on his lips intent ;
Yet more than theirs the wonder and surprise
That brighten up his little grandson's eyes :
The matron's fingers at her knitting stray
And drop the stitch, unnoticed, by the way ;
While the hale neighbour, who has tramped again
The upland path, to talk of beeves and grain,
Warms with the tale, and, more familiar grown,
Asks for the sword, — the jewel rarely shown.
The old man yields, — he bids the grandson go :
The boy, obedient, dreads an ambushed foe ;

The candle flickers in the chilly air,
And loud beneath him creaks the oaken stair;
The antique bedroom and the lofty press
Add fresher terrors to his vague distress;
Some Indian, surely, crouches by the door,
Or glides, with stealthy step, across the floor;
A troop of redcoats lurk beneath the bed,
Shake the loud sash, and walk the beams o'er-
head ;
Thrilling with dread, his temples seem to feel
The scalping-knife, his ribs the pointed steel;
With hurried hands he opes the guarded chest,
Lifts the old weapon from its honored rest,
And slips, emboldened, from the chilly gloom
Back to the gladness of the peopled room,
Where, when his feet have found their former
place,
The ruddy firelight shows a braver face.

Thus, till the blazing logs grow black and cold,
The Legend pens them in its charmèd fold.

Though o'er their lives delusive Fancy flings
No rainbow solace from her tinsel wings,—
Though the harsh round of common toil they
tread,
Nor into sunshine lift the plodding head,
Yet in their simple hands the key is held
To all the misty chronicles of Eld,
And from her stores they take a joy as true
As e'er the prophet-soul of Genius knew.
The scholar ponders the immortal page
Where Shakspeare's sun gives light to every
age,
Or, trembling, walks in Milton's grander spell,
The burning marl, the hollow vaults of hell;
But England's poorest peasant-child can see
Bold Robin Hood beneath the greenwood tree,
And Cheviot's flocks the shepherd's ballad
know
Of stout Earl Percy and the milk-white doe.
The fisher, rocked on some Norwegian fjord,
Sings of the old Berserker's steed and sword,

Hallows the mound that marks a Viking's grave,
And sees his white-winged dragons breast the
wave.

Valencia's mountains echo, as of yore,
The battle-song of Cid Campeador;
In Suabia's valleys keeps his ancient guard,
In many a song, the brave Count Eberhard,
And Tuscan children 'mid the vines grow pale
At Pisa's curse and Ugolino's tale.

While Power and Learning, emulous of Fame,
Wrest from the stubborn world a brief acclaim,
Yet, blindly marching to the common doom,
Build o'er their empty urns a pompous tomb,
A simple deed, the unsought glory won
By some frank soul, that could not else have
done,
Will to his name a living beauty give,
And in the world's embalming memory live.
In epic grandeur, we may spurn the sod,
Be more than man, scarce less than demigod,

And in those temples where the Few adore
Be throned in joy and glory evermore :
With tragic torch, our steps may downward tend
Through the soul's caverns, deepening without
end,
Past fires volcanic, blazing fierce and dun,
And still, cold lakes, that never saw the sun :
Filled with a thirst insatiate and divine,
Our lips may quaff the lyric's glorious wine,
Or, touched more gently, by a thirst as true,
Sip from the pastoral's cup of honey-dew,
Yet, in our pride, the precious draught we waste
On duller lips, that have not learned to taste.
The Mind's creations need a finer sense
To feel their power, and do them reverence :
They o'er their narrow fealties reign apart,—
The Legend nestles in the nation's heart !

Self-sprung, like Athens' children, from the
soil,
It needs no touch of Art's sublimer toil ;

It lifts no wing to skies more cold and rare,
But treads the earth and breathes the common
air.

So, as the race and language pass away,
It twines, perennial, round their slow decay,
And thrills the pulses of decrepitude
With the rich vigor of its youthful blood.
In vain the master of the cunning lyre
Would lend his fashion to its plain attire,
Mask with his dreams of fair ideal grace
The homely features of its breathing face,
Or give its limbs of living strength alone
The shape symmetric of the chiselled stone.
In Nature's heart, the same compassion mild
Beats for her poorest and her proudest child ;
Soothed on her breast, to all alike belong
The joy and solace of her truest song,
And though the splendid mausoleums wrought,
In long aspiring, by the Kings of Thought,
May stand exempt from jealous Time's control,
The simplest word that moves the general soul

Will, glad and frequent as a star, arise
To light the path of countless centuries !

And thou, our land ! nursed at a savage
breast !

Thou, Empire-child ! Young Titan of the West !
What songs to mould thee did harmonious part,
When thou wert growing under Freedom's
heart ?

What was the legend that she told to thee
When thou wert lisping at her parent-knee ?
Thine were no shapes of beauty, such as beamed
Upon thine elder brothers, as they dreamed :
For thee no gods, thine early toil to share,
Walked on thy hills and brightened thy blue air :
The fairy forms, the dreams, Olympus-born,
That peopled Earth when smiled the Attic morn,
Gave to young Greece the glory of his eye,
And taught his feet no step but Victory !
But when the world first knew thine infant tread,
Its breast was soulless, — Pan himself was dead !

For thee no gush of summer leaves betrayed
The Hamadryad laughing in the shade ;
Though wreathing mist the mountain steeps un-
veiled,
No longer there the glimmering Oread sailed,
Nor, where the cliff-born torrent left its home,
The Naiad shouted through her silver foam.
Where the salt sea-wave on the breakers fell,
No beckoning Siren strung her wreathèd shell, —
No angry Æolus heaped his cloudy rack,
Nor Triton-boys bestrode the dolphin's back.
Yet, though the early oracles were flown,
As fair the long-forsaken temple shone ;
And though the legend of the age of gold
Lay overgrown with immemorial mould,
From its last flower was blown a wingèd seed
That rooted in thy soil the ancient breed, .
And the world's Dragons saw in thee restored
Alcides' blood, — the lineage of their lord.
The Earth thy homage never learned to claim,
But made thee master of her mighty frame.

No solemn presence in the boundless woods
Upheld thy axe that swept the solitudes ;
When thy bold feet the nesting eagle won,
Thine eye, unblenching, triumphed in the sun ;
And on the crags, around whose weedy verge
Perpetual onset makes the baffled surge,
Thou sat'st, in musing, when the sea-bird's
wail

Called up the night and piped the rising gale.
In all those forms of power, thine eye beheld
But subject forces, and their rage compelled :
Girt with a strength unspoiled did Nature stand,
But thou wert lord, and thine the shaping hand !

Around thy cradle, rocked by wintry waves,
The Pilgrim Fathers sang their pious staves,
While like an echo, wandering dim and vast
Down the snow-laden forests of the Past,
The Norsemen's hail through bearded lips rang
out,
Frothy with mead, at every wassail-bout,

And softer chimes, the rugged stops between,
Filled far away the Southern woods of green,
Bearing the music of chivalric Spain
To meet and mingle with that ruder strain.

Take we the volume, where thy legend stands,
And turn its pages with our childish hands.
How the rare flavor, stealing to the brain,
Informs each scene, and bids it breathe again !
Like its own dreams, the willing mind believes
The shapes that glimmer on the pictured leaves.
We swing their swords, we sing their lusty
songs ;
The far remembrance to ourself belongs ;
Their toil and daring seem our lives to crown,
And we are heirs to all their old renown !

Rein to that flattering fancy let us give,
And for a moment in our legends live,
Roaming from year to year, from land to land,
Where'er may wave the weird enchanter's wand.

The stars are out ; our fires begin to shine ;
Our sleep is cradled by the chanting pine ;
The bubbling noise of undiscovered floods
Comes through the heart of deep magnolia woods,
And Ponce de Leon, leaning on his brand,
Cries, " God for Spain ! — the Fountain is at
hand ! "

Now green Virginia greets us from the seas :
Thy hand, bold Raleigh, gives the landward
breeze
The lion-flag, that late, in summer calms,
Flamed in the shade of Orinoco's palms,
When, to thy poet-vision fair unrollèd,
The splendid fable waved its wings of gold,
But like the faithless bird of Eastern lore,
Still farther flying, mocked thy hope the more.
Though vain the fabric thou didst toil to frame,
Yet, gallant Raleigh ! we have kept thy name :
Long with our annals shall thy story blend,
Whom noble Sydney cherished as his friend,—

Who pressed thy Spenser's heart in frank embrace,
And stood with mighty Shakspeare face to face !

We turn the leaf : we breathe the smoky calm
That fills thy quiet streets, New Amsterdam ! —
Quiet, save when Van Corlear's trump is blown,
And warlike Peter puts his harness on :
Then fume the burghers, fired with bold emprise,
Then beer goes down, and angry whiffs arise !
Loud to the combat shrills the piping reed
'Gainst prying Yankee and presumptuous Swede,
While eager swords, that cannot find a foe,
Lay many a field of embryo sourkraut low.
Soon the fierce puffs their valorous heads en-
shroud,
And their own wrath enwraps them as a cloud.
There let them rest : their sturdy work survives
To check our rude irreverence of their lives ;
No longer, then, their portly shades provoke, —
Thy dreams, Van Twiller, did not end in smoke !

Where Delaware rolls his glassy waters, now
The light winds urge our Scandinavian prow :
The anchor drops, — the shallop strikes the shore,
And Calmar's Key unlocks an empire's door.
Our forest-fort displays its ramparts bare,
And Printz, our leader, plants his banner there.
How well he kept it let those envoys say,
Whose clumsy galleon wallowed in our bay.
When of submission spoke the braggart carles,
Shot through his blood the rage of all the Jarls :
“ By Odin's throne ! ” his iron accents burst ;
“ *We* strike our flag ? *we* wear your yoke ac-
cursed ?
We bend the knee, and break the Swedish
sword,
And hail your limping chieftain as our lord ?
Be this our answer ! ” In each trowsers-band
Our Northern giant twists his brawny hand,
Plants his firm foot, that jars the solid floor,
And hurls the burly Dutchmen through the
door.

Could we but linger, many a page remains
Illuminate, despite its mouldy stains.
We join the hymns of Puritanic sires,
Sedately grouped about the forest-fires,
When, firm in faith, they bind their bleeding scars,
Returning home from Narraganset wars.
We hear the volleyed shot, the Indian yell,
Ring through the pass where stubborn Brad-
dock fell,
Or, following up the steps of glory, mix
In the embattled ranks of Seventy-Six,—
Arm in hot haste on Concord's trampled
ground,—
Toil in the trench that hallowed Bunker's
mound,—
Fire with old Wayne the Hudson's midnight
gorge,—
Starve on the wintry hills of Valley Forge,—
House with the panther under Marion's pines,
And lead the charge at Yorktown's closing
lines !

These are the legends, at whose living springs
Our bards should drink, and lave their dusty
wings;

Then, from the baptism rising newly-born,
Soar in the sunshine of their country's morn!
Not theirs to grope amid barbaric mould,
Where nameless mounds their nameless idols
hold,—

To bait their lines from antiquarian sods,
And weave grim stanzas to the dumb-eyed gods,
Where feathered serpents fill the sacred grove
And Quetzatcoatl takes the place of Jove!

They need not dig, to grace the toilsome page,
The shapeless relics of a fossil age.

Let gaunt Behemoth rest his weary bones,
And drop no tear on dead Palenque's stones,
Nor dream, like those who wrought on Babel's
plain,

To pile them heavenward, building in your brain
Some monstrous epic, doomed to rust, ere long,
A Gorgon-head upon the shield of Song!

But some there be, whose lips already know
The true old speech, and breathe its native
glow.

Honor to him who from his Baltic home
Followed the Viking over the unploughed foam,
And heard the sob, when, clad in warlike gear,
Beside the tower he fell upon his spear,—
Led by whose hand, along the sounding sea,
We walk thy meadows, virgin Acadie !
Sail with thy children, while their slight canoe,
Cape after cape, drops down the still bayou,
With restless Gabriel rove through many a scene,
And weep the tears of sweet Evangeline.
Him, too, we name, whose clangling lines reveal
The roar of cannon and the ring of steel,
The border fight, the strife of man with man,
When Papist sword was crossed with Puritan.
He guides our steps where, in their bloody bed,
Pentucket's foes lie mingled with her dead,—
He bids us plant Sebago's funeral tree,
And with La Tour for vengeance sweep the sea !

We leave the Past : how stands the nation
now ?

What newer spoils have crowned his hardy
brow ?

What deeds are done, what chronicle sublime
Shall be the legend of his later time ?

The nursling giant, in whose gripe of pride
The serpent wrongs of old Oppression died,
While rocked on Freedom's buckler yet he lay,
Like a young athlete lifts his arm to-day !

With conscious strength, the prophecy of fame,
He wrestles in the world's Olympic game.

From Northern lakes, where brief the summer
smiles,

His realm, expanding, meet the Indian isles ;
The savage elements become his slaves ;
His fiery heralds ride the conquered waves ;
Beyond the central wastes his journey goes,
By sandy plains and over Alpine snows,
Where grander oceans break on beach and crag,
And fresher breezes toss his fearless flag, —

Where, pausing, bounded in his march elate,
He plants his pillars at the Sunset's gate!

Not vain the question, if of right belong
To present deeds the seed of future song.
Full many a goodly measure has been sown
On windy plains and wastes of barren stone,
And many a stalk, that finds a place to sprout,
Will never see the ripening harvest out,
But rankly shoot and prematurely drop,
For Heroes are a most uncertain crop.
Yet, from our time, it were no vain belief,
The reaper Fame may bind *one* golden sheaf,
Not from the plants of battle-soil alone,
But fragrant flowers, in milder gardens grown.
There, too, shall move the endless length of trains
Westward across the desert stretch of plains,
And there, where wide the watery circle dips,
Swell the white canvas of a thousand ships,
Bearing those hordes (and still their ranks in-
crease)
Who go to find — or *feel* — the golden fleece.

The stalwart life that loves the mountain air,
Earth's freest blood, shall pulse immortal there,—
Life, that ne'er sits with idle pinions furled,
But takes its joy in God's created world,
Strong as the rock, and as the sunbeam warm,
Frank as the sky, impetuous as the storm !
But hark ! the minute gun, the muffled bell,
E'en while I speak, begin a hero's knell.
Thou, too, my country, hear'st that heavy chime,
And sitt'st a mourner in thy woe sublime,
Thy heart cast down, oppressed by sudden fears,
Thine eyes o'ercharged with unavailing tears.
Well mayst thou mourn ! there comes no quick
relief,—

No morning twilight to thy night of grief.
His was the generous heart to thee unclosed,
His was the arm whereon thy trust reposed,
His was the simple faith, the will complete,
The soldier daring, never taught retreat,
That only saw, wherever danger led,
The star of duty shining overhead,

Followed that star through battle's fiery breath,
And hailed it shining on the front of Death!

Here let me pause; nor seek to lift the eye
And wear the kindling face of Prophecy,
Pretend to tear the future's veil aside
And pamper dreams of patriotic pride
With gorgeous pictures, where the nation's hand
Shall touch the tropic and the polar land,
Clasping the Continent in one embrace,
The mighty heirdom of the Saxon race!
Enough for her, in self-dependent power,
To wrest the favor of the present hour.
And whether we, who see that hour go by,
Shall see her standard brush the Southern sky,
Shall hear her trumps their morning marches blow
Where Orizaba lifts its helm of snow,—
Shall join the cheers of Independence Day
By Cuba's palms or Hudson's icy bay,—
Or whether Factions rise to overwhelm,
And leave behind a clipped and shrunken realm,

Still be it ours that manly trust to keep,
Wherewith our Legend's living pulses leap,
Copy their strength, their zeal, their faith sub-
lime,
And leave the Future unto God and Time!

